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Freeway foes cite pollution concerns at MAG hearing

Kerry Fehr-Snyder

The Arizona Republic

Jun. 19, 2007 01:04 PM

South Mountain Freeway foes found another venue to complain about the proposed freeway through Ahwatukee Foothills.

They descended on a public hearing Monday at the Maricopa Association of Governments in downtown Phoenix to argue that the proposed 22-mile freeway would boost air pollution, endanger public health and risk federal highway funding.

"This will be the straw that breaks the camel's back," said Steve Brittle, director of the grass-roots group, Don't Waste Arizona.

He was referring to the Valley's pollution problem and the federal government's threat to withhold freeway funds if air quality doesn't improve.

Brittle, who joined several other freeway opponents, questioned MAG's air-quality analysis and claimed it shows excessive levels of a dust called PM-10.

But MAG officials said their so-called "conformity analysis" meets federal standards.

Steve Brittle, an environmental activist and founder of Don't Waste Arizona, said the freeway's proposed route along Pecos Road to 55th Avenue would contribute to high pollution readings at an air quality monitoring station at 43rd Avenue and Broadway Road.

"This is already an area with the worst air in the county," he said of the south Phoenix monitor.

The area, he added, is populated with ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged residents who often live in polluted areas despite environmental justice goals put forth by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The 43rd Avenue and Broadway Road monitor often shows high pollution readings that exceed standards but are averaged with readings from other Valley stations showing lower levels of pollution.

Brittle, who joined the South Mountain Freeway fight in the past several months, said he didn't expect his comments to change the county's transportation plans or air-quality analysis.

"I really doubt that my comments will be considered, but it is important from a litigation standpoint to have informed the committee of these issues and discrepancies, especially the civil rights/Title VI issues, as informed, intentional violations have more weight in court," Brittle wrote in an e-mail after Monday's hearing.

Freeway opponents have long threatened to file a lawsuit to block construction of the estimated \$1.7 billion project on environmental grounds.

Greta Rogers, a director in the non-profit grass-roots Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, used Monday's hearing to spread her anti-South Mountain Freeway message.

"You have been deceived and diluted as a community as a whole by ADOT," Rogers said.

She complained that the freeway would result in a "major dynamiting blast" through the western end of South Mountain Park.

She also criticized the Arizona Department of Transportation for ongoing delays in producing a draft environmental impact statement. The report originally was to be released in 2004 but now isn't expected until sometime in 2008.

The delay could work in the favor of freeway opponents by giving state, federal and city leaders time to negotiate with the Gila River Indian Community south of Ahwatukee for an alignment on the reservation.

Tribal leaders have been opposed to building the freeway on tribal land but last year formed a transportation committee to negotiate with the state on various freeway projects, including the South Mountain Freeway-Loop 202.

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Kerry 'un-fehr' Snyder writes that participating in the democratic process and actually taking the time to show up and comment at public hearings is tantamount to "complaining". Great.

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This article is ridiculous. The pollution at the 43rd avenue monitoring station is the result of a lack of development in that area. We have the open river bed and river banks which the wind picks up dust from. We also have the older businesses in that area where they do open burning, vehicle activity on dirt lots and that type of thing. Freeways do not bring pollution, just look at the monitors next to the 101. The traffic on the 101 has exploded but all these monitors are way below stringent federal pollution standard levels. Bringing the South Mountain freeway through would be the best thing for the 43rd avenue pollution. It will increase the value of land in that area and result in an upgrade in development with lower pollution. We need to get rid of the junkyards and other high polluting entities around 43rd avenue and replace them with landscaped businesses. A freeway is exactly the cure the pollution around 43rd avenue needs.

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